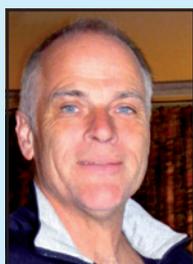


Newsletters: why they're vital to communication

- You may have not given much thought to the importance of producing practice newsletters, but the authors believe they are vital for sharing valuable information with your clients – and to building business loyalty.



by MIKE
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HANDS UP THOSE of you who think newsletters are a chore and a complete waste of time and money? I imagine quite a few of you feel this way, but it really is time more practices got their heads around this particular marketing issue; it could play a major part in the development of your business.

It is likely "the humble practice newsletter" is not at the top of your things to do list, but, in our view, this simple piece of marketing is probably the most effective client-boosting method at your disposal. Sadly, many of you are actually missing the point of a newsletter. It is not merely a repetitive pet information leaflet, to be churned out at the press of a button with little thought for its content and use. Newsletters should not be about choosing the cheapest option, or producing the same boring news year after year without giving the content much thought. If you currently have one, you may feel it is satisfactory and is one less thing you have to think about; you may be thinking your job is done once it is unpacked from the box or run off your own practice printer.

Denial

"We don't need a newsletter," we hear you say. "Our practice is built on word-of-mouth recommendation". However, a newsletter provides an excellent opportunity to actively add to your word of mouth. Some practices may consider marketing to be a *Yellow Pages* advertisement.

This may well be essential, but like internet directory listings and websites, it is "passive" marketing. These rely on enlisting clients who are actively seeking a new or alternative veterinary practice, or urgent veterinary services.

A newsletter is your opportunity to actively, and regularly, present pet owners with reasons to visit your surgery, and should be part of a "bare-minimum" marketing strategy at your practice.

Light at the end of the tunnel

Most of you see the value of booster reminders as a way of prompting clients to maintain elements of preventive care. This usually ensures at least one visit a year to your practice, for that word-of-mouth opportunity.

A practice newsletter expands this opportunity to cover as many other preventive reminders as you feel appropriate, and with greater frequency – pulling clients back to your practice more often. Whether your focus is profitability, quality of service, client relations or animal welfare, these aspects can all be encompassed in your newsletter.

Fresh eyes

So, you already have a newsletter. Well done – but have you really looked at it recently? Is it:

- Interesting to pet owners?
- A good read?
- Visually attractive?
- Full of news and features about your practice?

Or is it:

- Boring and repetitive?
- Too clinical?
- Produced in the same old format you've had for years?
- Merely an information leaflet with your name and telephone number?

Remember, no two practices are the same, so your newsletter content should reflect your practice. The staff at any veterinary practice have a wealth of information, experience and care that clients and potential clients in your area should know about.

Top tips for a healthy newsletter

- Choose your content carefully.
- Ensure your articles are client friendly; remember your clients are pet owners not vets.
- Remember that news takes on a variety of forms. Interesting, unusual and successful cases offer some of the best information you have, as they provide the opportunity to inform and impress clients about your practice, your staff and the pets they treat. A story about a lost and injured pet reunited with its grateful owner, (with accompanying photos) says a lot more about microchipping than a straight article on the benefits.
- Reports about events your practice is involved in, such as open days, fairs or pet shows, can be published either before or after the event. They are a good way of showing off your efforts in the local community.



- Provide articles on preventive healthcare, such as dental treatments, fleas, worms, weight control, diet, exercise and vaccinations. All of these are “life-long” basics, and should be repeated at regular intervals. You should use a different format and new pictures each time to ensure the articles remain fresh. These should remind existing clients of the importance of continuity, and inform new pet owners who need education.
- Introduce new members of the team through staff profiles, which is an important form of PR. The devoted pet owner wants to know who is caring for “Tiddles” when he is brought in for his op. The most important factor about your practice is its people.
- Include articles about your practice improvements, refurbishments and new equipment – such articles allow you to announce and explain their benefits.
- Promote pet health schemes, nurse clinics, pet insurance, special offers, puppy parties etc.
- Clearly display surgery hours, address, telephone number, location map, parking facilities and website address. Essential information is then easily accessible for new pet owners or existing clients who see your newsletter.

Let your clients feel they are a real part of your practice, and that there is more to the relationship than seeing one of

your vets once a year. Newsletters have an advantage, namely they are not perceived to be a marketing tool. Hopefully, clients receiving your newsletter will gain the impression yours is a friendly practice that cares for its pet patients and their owners.

‘I’m no writer or designer’

“This is all very well”, we hear you say, “but where am I going to find the time to do all this? I’m a vet, not a journalist”. If you do not have suitable in-house staff, don’t be reluctant to use outside help. After all, you can probably drive the surgery ambulance, but you will take it to a mechanic when it needs fixing. Newsletters are no different. You probably have some idea what you would like to gain from producing a newsletter, but you don’t need to write and design it if you don’t want to.

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It is up to you to ensure pet owners see your practice as the best from a wide available choice – whether on price, professionalism, service or friendliness.

Specialist companies are available that are geared to doing it for you. Armed with the minimum of information, a quality newsletter can be produced – and by quality we mean one that really sells your practice as a whole to pet owners.

Effective use

So, now you have a brand new spanking newsletter, it is time to use it effectively. Don’t stick copies in a cupboard or at the back of reception. Some points to remember:

- Display copies of the newsletter proudly and prominently.

- Get your receptionist to hand them to clients when they arrive.
- Where appropriate, include them in your client mail and existing booster reminders, as this requires no additional postage and it will ensure most clients will get at least one copy a year.
- If you have a website, place a PDF copy for surfers to view or download. It is so important to keep news on websites current. Old news is not good news.
- If you are gathering client email addresses, send them a PDF or a link to your website’s news page.
- To reach potential new clients in your area, consider leaflet distribution. Once a year will probably be enough, and such a service is usually available at a reasonably economic rate.

Cost

In relation to your overall budget, the costs are extremely low, and with a good newsletter the rewards could be high. If you have a poor newsletter, you would be better off not spending money on it at all.

Wake up and smell the coffee

Veterinary practices can no longer be complacent or assume pet owners will be queuing by their doors at opening time. Competition is out there. It is up to you to ensure pet owners see your practice as the best from a widely available choice – whether on price, professionalism, service or friendliness. Once you have drawn pet owners to your practice, you must encourage them to stay with you – and a good newsletter can play a part in this.

Take our advice: don’t underestimate the power of the humble practice newsletter.

MIKE and CAROL RICHARDSON specialise in writing, designing and publishing veterinary newsletters, practice leaflets, literature and websites as Vetarazzi Publications. Carol has experience of “veterinary surgery life”, having worked as a receptionist in an Essex practice, and later holding responsibility for its marketing. Mike has more than 20 years’ experience in direct marketing, design, print and photography.